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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/PPD, EUR/CARC

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SUBJECT: PROFESSORS ACCUSED OF CORRUPTION; JOURNALIST BEATEN

¶1. Summary: On March 13, local youth NGO Miasin staged an initiative designed to publically denounce corruption in Armenia's universities. The group placed photos of allegedly crooked professors in several highly trafficked areas of the city. Reactions were mixed, but passionate. The pro-government group was criticized by university administrators, politicians and human rights groups. In response, that same day, a group of students from Yerevan State Linguistic University (Brusov) marched in opposition to the initiative. Miasin's motives for launching the campaign remain unclear.

¶2. In addition to the controversy raised by Miasin's actions, a well-known photojournalist covering the march was severely beaten when he attempted to enter Brusov University without authorization. Brusov's rector issued a statement "regretting" the journalist's injuries, but maintaining that he provoked the incident. Human Rights Defender Armen Harutyunian criticized the beating, citing a "climate of intolerance in Armenian society" that encourages a sense of impunity when attacking journalists. The security guard responsible for the beating was detained and is under investigation.
End Summary.

Wanted Posters in Public Arena

¶3. On March 13, local youth NGO Miasin (Together) organized a protest initiative designed to publically denounce corruption in some of Armenia's most prestigious universities. The group placed photos, labeled with the phrase "bribe-takers," of more than 30 allegedly corrupt professors from Yerevan State University (YSU), the Pedagogical University, and Brusov in several highly trafficked areas of the city. The photos were hung overnight without a prior statement or press release from the NGO. The initiative generated mixed emotions from students, faculty and the general public.

¶4. Miasin stated that professors were identified as corrupt by students in an anonymous survey. Those in favor of the initiative have praised the group for "taking action," noting that anticorruption measures are "strategies that remain on paper only," and that the denunciations have drawn public interest to the issue. The group has received criticism, however, particularly from students and journalists, for refusing to reveal concrete evidence against professors and providing no information that would permit verification of the accuracy of the survey. Many students at Brusov have speculated that students could have accused professors of bribery motivated by revenge. When asked, students of the universities and departments cited above have generally (and perhaps predictably) claimed not to have participated in the initiative. Further credibility concerns were raised when a journalist from the Respublika Armenia newspaper investigated one of the photos and learned that it was a person who had never worked at the university and was currently Armenia's ambassador to Egypt.

¶5. Brusov issued a statement condemning the activities of Miasin as "irresponsible," "unfounded," and "provocative." The Rector of Yerevan State University said Miasin reminded him of the Stalin regime of 1937 when people were charged without any grounds.

Opposition Heritage Party MP Vardan Khachatrian said the accusers should either provide proof or be prosecuted for libel. The Yerevan director of Transparency International described Miasin's actions as "a dark story lacking in transparency."

Journalist Beaten

¶ 6. In response, Brusov students organized a protest march against the Miasin initiative on the same day, walking from the Miasin headquarters to the university. They were followed by a group of journalists. When well-known photojournalist Gagik Shamshian attempted to enter the university with the students, he was stopped by security guards. A verbal altercation with one of the guards ended with Shamshian being severely beaten. An ambulance was called for from the offices of Radio Liberty, where Shamshian had fled. He was later diagnosed with severe injuries to the groin and internal bleeding. The security guard has been detained and an investigation is underway.

¶ 7. On March 14, Brusov issued a statement claiming Shamshian had instigated the conflict. In support of the statement, the university's press office presented video footage demonstrating Shamshian's aggressive behavior and refusal to obey university regulations. The statement also criticized the security guard, noting that he should not have responded to the journalist's verbal assaults with force. In an interview with Iravunk newspaper on March 17, Rector Suren Zolyan stated, "I am sorry for Gagik Shamshian's physical injuries but I have to say that it was instigated by him. We filed a complaint with the police to investigate the case. We regret that the security guards attacked

YEREVAN 00000219 002 OF 002

him instead of grabbing him by his hands and calling the police."

A "Culture of Intolerance"

¶ 8. Journalists and human rights activists have been vocal in their condemnation of the beating. Human Rights Defender Armen Harutyunian denounced the incident stating, "Such an action against a journalist once again proves the culture of intolerance rooted in our society. This is a result of the fact that similar cases have gone unpunished in the past." Member of Parliament Anahit Bakhshian also publically noted that the beating is a "result of a criminal atmosphere which offers impunity and prevails in the country." A group of media and civil society NGOs have also decried the incident. Their statement maintains, "This is yet another case of obstructing the professional activities of a journalist." Reports on attacks or pressure placed on journalists have occurred an average of 4-6 times per year for the past several years, with the largest number of reported attacks (18) occurring in 2008.

¶ 9. Comment: Miasin arose in response to the opposition youth organization "Hima" (Now). The group appears to have the blessing of President Serzh Sargsian and Prime Minister Tigran Sargsian and is loosely connected to the MIAK political party (now headed by MCA-Armenia CEO Ara Hovsepian). The President turned up at their first anniversary celebration on February 21 and the Prime Minister expressed public support last November for Miasin's declared goal, "to disclose all corruption cases in universities," if not for their methods. Corruption in education remains a chronic problem in Armenia and the GOAM has taken recent steps to address this, including closing private universities viewed as diploma mills, establishing anti-corruption hotlines, and raising teacher salaries. Ten instructors have been fired from the Yerevan State University since 2007 for taking bribes "and serious disciplinary offenses. The issue continues to provoke strong emotion. End Comment.

Pennington